



WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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January 30, 2018

WER 7007.02
Sweetwater County
Wilderness Study Area Prioritization Concept
Sweetwater County

Mark Kot
Public Lands Planner
Sweetwater County
80 West Flaming Gorge Way, Suite 109
Green River, WY 82935

Dear Mr. Kot,

The staff of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (Department) has reviewed the proposed Sweetwater County Wilderness Study Area Prioritization Concept. We offer the following comments for your consideration for the ranking of Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) within the Rock Springs Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management. At this time, there are 11 designated WSA solely within the field office boundary, and one that is shared with the Rawlins Field Office (Adobe Town). These WSA represent approximately 3% of the land in Sweetwater County.

WSA contribute significant areas of relatively undisturbed and road free habitats in this heavily roaded portion of desert and associated uplands of southwestern Wyoming. They provide important refuge areas for big game animals and enhances our ability to maintain wildlife populations (both terrestrial and aquatic) within management objectives in Sweetwater County. A number of species benefit from the existence of these habitats as currently managed, ranging from Greater sage-grouse, elk, mule deer, and pronghorn, to Colorado River cutthroat trout, lake trout, kokanee salmon, and spadefoot toads. Several of these areas have small relic populations of aspen, spruce and fir habitats unique to the arid sea of the Red Desert and Great Basin, and act as stopover sites during migration for neotropical migratory bird species.

These areas also provide a unique desert hunting opportunity for our constituents. Few areas within Sweetwater County offer an opportunity to have a roadless hunting experience, like these WSA do. Hunting of the herds in these area (e.g. Steamboat elk herd, South Rock Springs deer and elk herds), is positively influenced because there exists limited areas where these species can avoid vehicle traffic. Additionally, these areas contribute to high quality hunting by providing escape/security cover that allows male individuals of these species to grow older and larger.

The Department was asked to submit a consolidated ranking list for these WSA. Given the differences between terrestrial and aquatic species needs, and the contribution these areas make to both, we prefer not to use a ranking system. Instead of numbering the WSA 1 through 12 and making a list, we recommend a more tiered approach, where “equal” values are recognized, be they aquatic or terrestrial.

TIER 1 – These areas provide the most significant contribution to local wildlife species (along with juxtaposition on the landscape and associated ACEC’s and SMA).

- Oregon Buttes, Whitehorse Creek, Honeycomb Buttes, Alkali Draw, South Pinnacles, Alkali Basin, and Red Lake – provides critically important habitats for elk, mule deer, Greater sage-grouse, and pronghorn, plus a host of neotropical migrants and sagebrush obligate species.
- Devils Playground/Twin Buttes – provides crucial erosion control necessary for Flaming Gorge Reservoir health and function, and some unique stopover habitats for neotropical migrants and juniper obligate songbirds. This WSA also provides some mesic spring habitats crucial for big game in the area.
- Red Creek – provides habitat for Colorado River cutthroat trout, is important for erosion control, provides significant roadless escape cover for the South Rock Springs mule deer and elk herds, and has unique (to Wyoming) pinyon pine-juniper and other associated habitat.

TIER 2 – These areas provide significant contribution to local wildlife species, but to a lesser extent than those listed above. They still should be managed in a similar manner.

- Buffalo Hump and Sand Dunes – provides a large area of security habitat used heavily by the Steamboat elk herd, Hunt Area 131 mule deer, and is in designated sage-grouse core area.

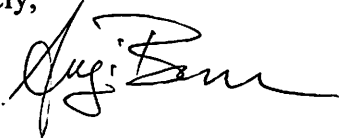
TIER 3 – This area provides some undisturbed and unique habitats but its contribution to overall herd size and health, and actual use by wildlife is less than the 11 listed above. It is deserving of protection for a number of reasons that do not include value to wildlife.

- Adobe Town – provides security cover for pronghorn, elk, and mule deer, especially for older male individuals of these species. Also, occupied habitat for Greater sage-grouse is present but is outside of designated sage-grouse core areas. The area is primarily dominated by arid badlands, reducing its overall contribution to most wildlife.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Mark Zornes, Wildlife Management Coordinator, at 307-875-3225.

Mark Kot
January 30, 2018
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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angi Bruce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Angi" being more prominent than the last name "Bruce".

Angi Bruce
Habitat Protection Supervisor

AB/lc/ml

cc: Todd Graham, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Mark Zornes, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Patrick Burke, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Robert Keith, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Kevin Spence, Wyoming Game and Fish Department